

*Book Reviews*

Susie Taylor. *Even Weirder Than Before*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2019. ISBN 978-1-550-81771-3

In the last few pages of *Even Weirder Than Before* the male love-interest drunkenly tells Daisy, our teenage first-person protagonist, "I always thought we'd end up together, but it just never happened." A few lines later, our not quite sober Lloyd Dobler vomits. Taylor continually plays—winkingly, I'd like to think—with our clichéd expectations for teenage narratives. Complete with allusions to other teenage narratives—including an archetype like *Romeo and Juliet*—and set during the rise of the teen movie in North American cinemas, the novel affords readers all the usual pleasures of those narratives: budding sexuality, poignant coming-of-age moments, a growing awareness of the complexities of adult behaviour. Yet it also firmly resists those clichés, subtly insisting on an emotional reality for its characters that rings more true than the best of John Hughes.

Comparisons to 1980s teen films feel inevitable, even if the characters never go to see one. The novel is set in Ontario of the 1980s: characters stretch the phone cords of their land lines, high school students write their assignments in notebooks with pens, and video games are relegated to arcades where girlfriends in tight jeans smoke illicit cigarettes, gossip, and try their best to fake enthusiasm for their boyfriends' ability to record their initials on the high score list. Those nostalgic for the 1980s will find a relatively unselfconscious rendering of that bizarre decade, and there's something satisfying about living in absence of smart phones and Twitter for 200-plus pages. National and international politics are almost completely absent from the novel; there are no knowing nods to the way that Thatcher rewrote the British economy and Reagan passively let a pandemic sweep over his country. Even AIDS itself is absent from the novel, but underplaying the historical setting struck me as a strong move: Daisy is a teenage girl and her world consists of her friends and her parents and her sister and her Street Fighter game-obsessed boyfriend.

Those who remember the decade's dark side of political backlash,

however, are not underserved. The one solid historical allusion that blares out for us comes in 1989, as the female characters find themselves riveted by the coverage of the École Polytechnique massacre in Montreal. That allusion allows Taylor to underline the misogyny of the period, driving it home in a classroom scene in which high school boys declare that feminism is to blame for driving the shooter “crazy.” The novel is set during a time when divorce among the middle-class was still something of a novelty, and when a university faculty wife was supposed to stay at home, ironing shirts. Even after Daisy’s father—an expert on mole rats, a specialty that might leave Taylor open to accusations of being a bit on the nose—leaves his long-time spouse for one of his graduate students, no one in the novel comments on the obvious power disparity. Casual sexual harassment, school faculty complicity, and even the subplot seduction and impregnation of a high school student all pass by without much comment from the cast. Readers are thus reminded that the novel’s action takes place not only before the invention of social media and *#MeToo* but before Anita Hill brought the issue of sexual harassment into living rooms across North America. Daisy’s mother sobs after her husband leaves her and she complains about men over bottles of white wine when her friend the feminist shows up to commiserate; she still makes sure that his shirts have been laundered and ironed when the wandering husband comes by to pick them up.

As we witness Daisy move through high school, her growing consciousness of sexual dynamics takes centre stage, and it would have been easy for the novelist to let the momentum of the boy-meets-girl narrative take over. Daisy watches her parents’ relationship fall apart; she witnesses her mother and father take new lovers; she sees her sister move through a confused late adolescence; an older girl Daisy admires falls pregnant and gives birth; Daisy herself leaves her virginity behind in a relatively uncomplicated way. Taylor manages to avoid, despite this very hetero-normative decade, to redirect our attention subtly towards female relationships. In a particularly lovely scene, two teenage girls watch *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* together for the first time.

Their shared reaction to the film is one of the most genuinely erotic scenes in the book; simultaneously it is also one of the most touchingly innocent.

I ended up reading *Even Weirder Than Before* twice: between the time I picked up the reviewer's copy in St. John's in October of 2019 and the time of this writing, October 2020, a blizzard brought St. John's to its knees, a global pandemic swept over the planet, fires burned down much of California, Oregon, and Washington, a second wave of sexual allegations swept over France and Quebec, and a dangerous political situation in the United States staggered towards a potentially terrifying dénouement. The novel held up both times, perhaps even improving against the context of global disaster. Certainly I read the novel greedily enough both times—Taylor pulls her reader by the sheer energy and humour of Daisy's voice and by bringing the subtle drama of the everyday into bold relief. She's also quite skilled at bringing out quiet teenage moments: wee-hour hangovers and long treks home in the dawn after nights gone wrong are poignantly rendered. Taylor understands the political instincts of a teenage girl, and, as it turns out, the political instincts of a teenage girl might be just what we need right now. Daisy sees the misogyny in her Toronto suburb far more clearly than her parents do, and that domestic misogyny feels like a web that extends indefinitely into the darkness. Yet Daisy's perception doesn't feel anachronistic or overly matured. Perhaps a bit like her father after all, Daisy is almost scientific in her approach to recording the mating habits of the adults around her.

Daisy's narrative ends as many such teenage narratives end, but not quite in the way that we might expect. I'll save this particular plot element for first-time readers, but I will say this: I was genuinely surprised on the closing page of the novel when I read the novel for the first time. That surprise initially made me wonder if the conclusion was entirely earned. My second reading revealed me to be a bit of an idiot, and a victim of Taylor's deft sleight-of-narrative hand: Taylor gives generous yet subtle clues about the real narrative arc of *Even Weirder Than Before* throughout the book. My inability to see this plot

twist coming likely said more about my own Generation X investment in movies like *The Breakfast Club* and *Sixteen Candles* than it does about Daisy's story, one that just happens to be set in the 1980s.

I very much look forward to seeing more from Taylor and I find myself hoping that the first-time novelist gives us a sequel to this quite Canadian, yet also oddly cosmopolitan, coming-of-age story.

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